

# The 'Kelingai Motif' in Iban's Tattoo Motif; A Case Study of Kampung Gayau Ulu Pantu, Sri Aman Sarawak

Gladys Tagie<sup>1</sup>, Nurul Shima Taharuddin<sup>2</sup>, Noor Aileen Ibrahim<sup>3</sup>

Faculty of Art & Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Perak,  
gladystagie82@gmail.com, <sup>2</sup>nurul026@uitm.edu.my, <sup>3</sup>nooraileen@uitm.edu.my

## ABSTRACT

This research is conducted on core problem that had occurred on 'Kelingai' motif (cultural form) among new modern young generation. 'Kelingai' motif is a symbol of indigenous culture Iban people in Sarawak, but ironically has many motives 'Kelingai' intertwined with a modern motif and has been widely used by young people today. This generation seems to take for granted for the beauties of 'Kelingai' motifs that they leave behind their original motifs of tattoo founded by their ancient generation before in valuable traditional art. 'Kelingai' motif represent its own meaning according to geographical factor and tattoo wearer's belief. This big question aroused deep interest for the researcher to explore and reveal the secret world of 'Kelingai' motif of tattoo. The research had been conducted among Kampung Gayau's resident who comes with their tattoo at all age levels. This research basically based on well-known theories, Erwin Panofsky Theory. This theory will reveal the meaning of 'Kelingai' history through it approaches such as in style, type and symbol domains in the theory. These domains help us to know better about the history of 'Kelingai' motif in Kampung Gayau, explicitly and also to Iban's society internationally as a group of people who nourishing their ancestors' life value into their young generation in modernization and globalization.

**Key Words:** Cultural form, Tattoo, Iban culture, Kampung Gayau

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of Kampung Gayau Ulu Pantu, Sri aman Sarawak.

Based on the report from Sarawak Government (2009) this largest state had divided into eleven administrative divisions. There are Betong Division, Bintulu Division, Kapit Division, Kuching Division, Limbang Division, Miri Division, Mukah Division, Samarahan Division, Sarikei Division, Sibu Division and Sri Aman Division.

Kampung Gayau, Ulu Pantu Sri Aman, Sarawak is an area comes from Sri Aman Division. This village had founded since at the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century and keep growing in term of population and the physical development for more generations until now. This village had been divided into five longhouses with each long house leader (Tuai Rumah) for the time being. All these longhouses are:

Table 1 The list of Long house Leader and its territory.

Name	Territory/Area
TR. Medang anak Janggi	Gayau Illi
TR. Dunggau anak Enteri	Gayau Ulu
TR. Galang anak Mancha,	Gayau Tinting
TR. Pasang anak Gaun	Gayau Tengah
TR. Rogers Nyaring anak Ibam	Gayau BINA

Tattooing in Borneo Island was recorded by early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The issue had been become a taboo for certain researchers before researchers probably due to the fact the location of island was quiet interior from the west country and also added with its reputation as a dangerous territory of head-hunter island. Therefore, the inhabitants in this island were greatly feared.

## **1.2 Statement of Problems**

The culture of Iban community in Sarawak has been exposed to many cultural influences from outside which resulted in the existence of multiculturalist elements in the indigenous culture. This situation also rose because most of the Iban community was migrated from longhouse to the city (urbanization process). During the migration process, there are no longer practices their traditional cultures on their real life.

The new generation seems to take for granted for the beauties of 'Kelingai' motifs that they leave behind their original motifs of tattoo founded by their ancient generation before in valuable traditional art.

So, the originality of 'Kelingai' motif or cultural form also become unrealistic with mixing it with the modern design of motif.

## **1.3 Objectives**

1. To study further on 'Kelingai' motif (cultural form) in Iban's Tatoo motif.
2. To study the formalistic and content 'Kelingai' motif In Iban tattoo motif.
3. To identify the meaning and the form of 'Kelingai' Motif

## **1.4 Scope of the Study**

The study is applied and looking out further among Iban culture at Kampung Gayau, Ulu Pantu Sri Aman Sarawak. Kampung Gayau was chosen as the side for this research review because Kampung Gayau as one of most population of Iban community. It is hard task to find the Iban man who was a wholly-traditional tattoo or known as 'Kelingai' motif. Most of the participants are from the young generation who do not concern about the history of the tattoo. Nevertheless, there are the secrets of beauty in Iban tattoo that needs to be reveal at Kampung Gayau, Sarawak.

## **1.5 Research Methodology**

This research will be conducted through art historical research methodology which is based on grounded theory by Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968). While the data collection through a method of qualitative approach via interview and questionnaire approach. The history and the origin of the 'Kelingai' motif among Iban community will be carried out through an in-depth study. In this historical research, the researcher has to apply that emphasized on the form and content of the 'Kelingai' Motif focusing on the Kampung Gayau.

According to Robert V. Daniels (1966), the task of historical research is to discover the foundations of historical truth and the understanding in deep basic of details. Nevertheless, historical research is the study of the written records from past. It did not just come from the imagination and personal experience but from a careful study. Moreover, historical research involves a wide range of view over all aspect of human behaviour.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Tattoo in general

Tattooing had existed in human civilization history since 12,000 years BC. There are various purposes of tattoo which it is come from culture to culture (inter-cross culture) and this keep grow and expend widely with its place on time line.

'Tattoo' word itself comes from word "tatu" in Tahitian word, means 'to mark something'. According to the history of tattoo, the earliest person who had practiced tattoo art was by Egyptians and it's continues practiced by different civilization and cultures. According to the archeological digging expedition report, they had revealed that the tattoo art was by Egyptian people since the Great pyramids were being constructed.

In early 1800s, tattoo represents the illegal status for those had involved or related with the underclass criminal world.

*"Beginning gradually in the late 1960's and early 1970s with the counter culture, Rock &Roll stars, and the British Punk movement, the popularity of tattoo has spread steadily until it now includes a surprisingly until it now includes a surprisingly broad cross section of society"*<sup>1</sup>

It can be denied that tattoo culture was practice in vary culture in all around the world. For this reason, tattoo had important purpose in its ritual and tradition. For example, in Borneo Island, those women who has tattoo in their forearm will telling us about certain skills they have. That they have deep knowledge and high skills in producing quality weaver clothes or products. On the other hand, she could be was a superwoman and every ordinary man can marry with her. She can also demand for high marriageable materials when she comes with the status. Besides that, the tattoos around the wrists and fingers are believed as the other way to cure and heal somebody else and also considered as self-protected by the spirit of the tattoo itself. But it was depended on what image they drew on their body. The images that they usually used are come from animal group such as tiger, snake, dragon and predator birds. Furthermore, the images or designs of tattoo are different in each tribe and tribe ad places. According to the history, through the design of certain tattoo, it can signify or the conformity of the membership in a clan or society. In the other words, tattoo is used for making their people from other groups among group's members of community.

The study about the tattoo among Iban community has become increasingly important around the ninetieth century. The study about the tattoo among Iban community has been done starting around the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Heyward N. (1963), Sarawak, Brunei and North Borneo. Singapore: Donald Moore for Eastern Universities Press Ltd Singapore. As a result, the origin of the tattooing practiced by the Iban community has to be preserve from vanishing by modernization effect in the globalization society. The knowledge about the world of Iban Tattoo is now essential because it is only way to understand and reveal the beauty in Iban people cultures, their believes or their real life style. This people live all around the Sarawak division, but the majority of Iban population is comes from Sarawak's second administrative area, Sri Aman Division, also known as the Second Division.

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor M.C (1995:B60) Marking the Body, Blurring the boundaries. Proquest Education Journals.Dec 8, 1995;42,15

## 2.2 The tattoo of Iban in Borneo

Borneo Island is the place that still runs and living with the strong tradition life-style culture wheter there is embracing their religions. Until today, Iban known as Sea Dayak (Dayak Laut) people come as the famous tribe of Borneo Island which still carries on their tribal tattooing art. For example, a young boy needs to make a first kill in wild animal hunting before he can enter to adulthood world. If the task completed, some various markings on his body will be done to celebrate and as reward on his achievement to become an adult and brave man.

According to Sellato (1992:23) the Iban's believe that spirits are living with them in every single life aspect every day. Therefore, they believe that by tattooing an object or creature on their body can draw in some powerful unseen energy and protection from these spirits.

Tattooing in Iban society also believed that there are strongly connected with the death cult and the headhunting activity of the Iban long time ago. Since the headhunting activity was no longer practiced by the Iban, it affected the tradition of tattooing. That is because, the enemy's head (*antu pala*) assumed as a trophy in the headhunting expedition. Moreover, some important occasions still required the presence of enemy's head as the honourable trophies such as mention on the table below.

Table 2 The Ceremony or occasions of Iban's.

1. The death of a Leader.
2. The birth of a child especially for a boy child
3. 'Bejalai' (A mission of tribal warfare
4. A bravery sign in the battle field and brought prestige image to the conquering warrior

According to Benedict Sandin (1980:80) it was believed that Iban people did not have any tattoo on their body at early ancient times in Iban history. The tattoo history in Iban people were started when there was an ancestor of Iban, named Gendup. According to the history, one day Gendup was taken suddenly to the spiritual world of *Antu Selang Pantang* unconsciously. From there, he saw most of the men had marked their bodies with tattooed beautifully. Gendup was felt attracted and being curious about the vision that he had going through. He desired to have the beautiful tattoo like them. Gendup asked them to make a tattoo for him. He wanted to be tattooed by three expert tattooists from the spiritual world. Then the expert made tattoo for Gendup for three days continuously, using needles and oily soot (Arok).

When the experts from the Antu Selang Pantang had completed their work, Gendup wanted to have some 'entegulun' tattoo on the back of his hands. Unfortunately, 'entegulun' tattoo is just only for those who had killed the enemies in war whereas this tattoo is just for a great warrior of Iban community. When Gendup returned back to his real world, he shared his experienced with his friends about what he had done during his visit to the spiritual world. From that moment, a number of Iban communities who was interested with Gendup's experience excited to have tattoo in their bodies since twelve generations ago.

## 2.3 The traditional process of tattooing.

The process of tattooing among Dayak (a large group of tribes, include Iban in Sarawak) is very ritualistic. Before beginning the process, the tattooist will kill a

selected rooster as a life sacrifice (*piring*) ceremony to their ancestor spirits. Its blood will be spilled over the tattoo tools/ instrument and the ritual chanting (*bebiau*) begins. This ritual chanting (*bebiau*) like an oral prayer to the ancestor spirits or Gods. After completing this ceremony, the tattoo session may begin safely from any bad omen or evil spirit.

The tattoo cannot be tattooed easily on the body. The Dayak boys who need to be tattooed at his age have his own tattoo. This tattoo had been selected especially for the boy and the selection done by the elderly men in the village. When comes to the tattoo ceremony, the boy will be dressed in the traditional bark cloth made from the mulberry tree, which is also used in the funeral ceremonies. Based from my observation, this event has a deep connection between that cloth and the changes in their lives of the beginnings or endings in their life span.

### **3. ANALYSIS OF TATTOO: FORMALISTIC ANALYSIS**

#### **3.1 Symbol of 'Kelingai' motif: The cultural form "Kelingai Motif"**

The cultural form, the 'Kelingai' motif is very synonym with Iban community. This unique motif symbolizes of a master craftman of Iban's in the art of carving. The motif of 'Kelingai' design is based on the beauties and smoothness decorative lines. The high level of creativity was needed to manipulate the curves in creating such of many beautiful motifs of 'Kelingai'. 'Kelingai' design are mostly based on the ideas and getting inspired by looking at the beauty of the mother; the animals and plants form such as crab, prawn, hornbill, deer, scorpion, crocodile, ferns and dragonfly. The wild plants or the ferns motif presented in carving is obviously can be identified through the sample of tattoo on the figure next.

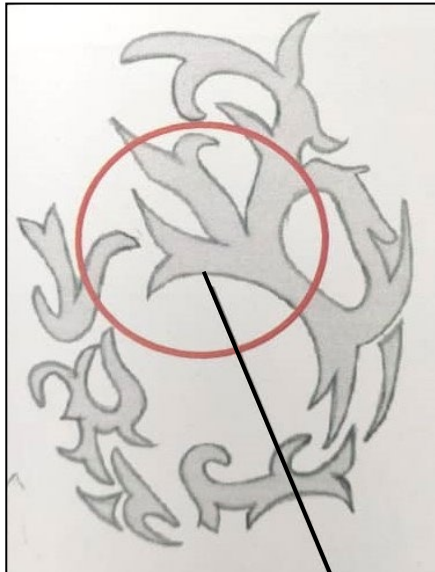


Figure 1: 'Kelingai' 1 on the left forearm

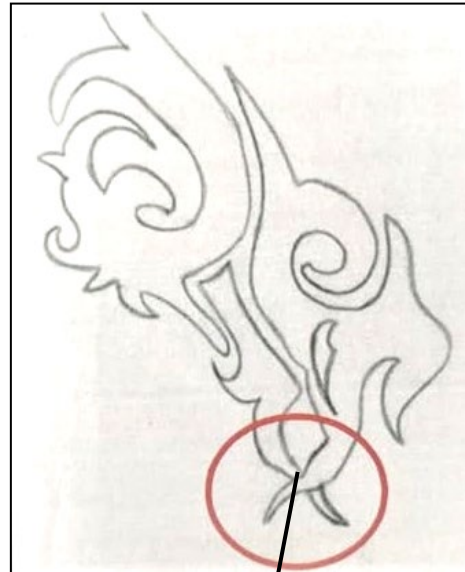


Figure 2: 'Kelingai' 2 on the left arm



Figure 3: Staghorn fern in Borneo

According to one famous art historian, E.H Gombrich, each motif could be carried out different meaning and changes. This approach can be exposed when we referring this 'Kelingai' motif design which is known as Iban traditional carvings. The symbols can be appeared traditionally at art of carvings such as in circular and triangle forms. This geometrical form and line appeared on the motif of 'Kelingai' as shown in figure below.

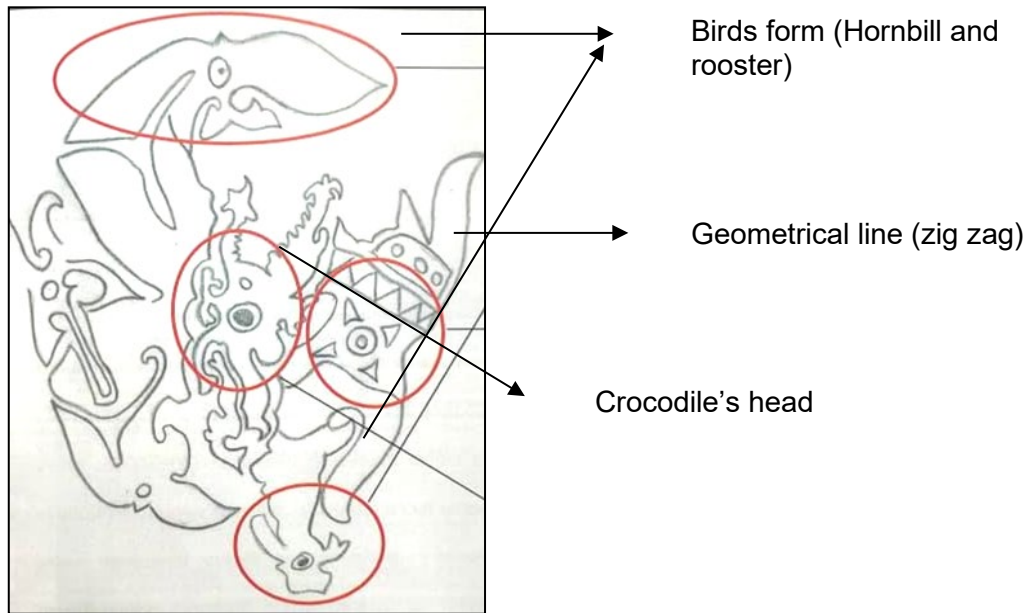


Figure 4: 'Kelingai 3' on the left forearm

This motif used structural zig-zag line, circle and triangle. In the other hand, some of the tattoo motif are also based on another two different motif such as birds (hornbill and rooster) and the crocodile's head. Usually, 'Kelingai' tattoo design is using one single colour only, blue-black colour nourishing more appearance as the symbol of traditional tattoo. Thus, the art of tattoo is the other medium to visualize other traditional events and creations, whereas cannot be apart with culture manifestation, especially in Iban people.

Although 'Kelingai' motif is made without any tone value but it more focusing on the similarity elements such as in figure 5 below, those motifs were made in pairs. The size of 'Kelingai' tattoo is determined by the location of the tattoo on the body. Finally, the motif design of 'Kelingai' can be defined as the beginning for some motif. Basically, it's started with the basic curve at the centre or some middle point. Then, other creative split curves will be developed and expanded beautifully by the tattoo artist until the selected design is finished. This process needs a lot of patience and diligence both parties to ensure the uniqueness of Iban culture preserved.

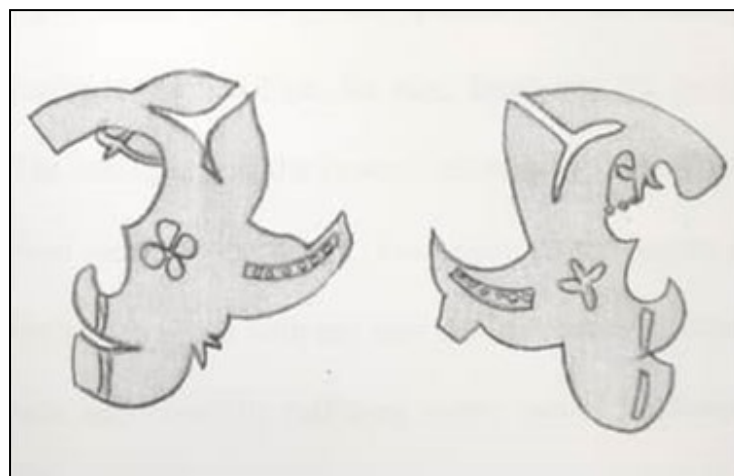


Figure 5: 'Kelingai 4' on the back of body.

### 3.2 ANALYSIS OF 'KELINGAI': CONTENT ANALYSIS

According to Augustine A. G (1991) the Iban community is known as experts on carving people. They like to tattoo themselves with the 'Kelingai' design motif. Some legends of Iban from other district say that, 'Kelingai' means the decoration of motif design of 'kala' (scorpion) that is why it has to be decorated with beautiful curves. Because of that, the designer of tattoo must be a creative person to finish the motif of that tattoo design. Generally, the motif of 'Kelingai' tattoo design is mostly based on aquatic and also other animals and birds.

Based on Iban's olden belief, known as paganism, the Iban people pay a great care of attention to the behaviour of birds and animals through their actions. It probably conveys warnings, guidance, or could be able influence their daily life decision. For example, before the Iban people start their journey or important expedition such as; farming, hunting, and fishing, they need a guidance which refers to the augural birds or animals. These augural birds and animals will guide them either the journey or the expedition done successfully or not. If not, the augury elements also warned them. They must return back to their home to keeping away from any bad luck.

Benedict Sandin (1980:93) says that birds' omens are associated with Iban's way of life especially with the most powerful among omen bird, *Singalang Burong*. This powerful omen bird as considered the greatest Iban's God who believed to have mandatory principal charge over prophetic communication between the deities and the mankind.

Those who leave their particular district will normally tattoo the 'Kelingai' on their bodies upon reaching a certain place or country. This will serve as symbol that they have visited the place concerned. Besides, the 'Kelingai' design done on the back of hand and fingers is called 'entegulun'. The 'entegulun' tattoo is the symbol of bravery and it belongs to certain people in the community. 'Entegulun' tattoo design is only for the head hunter who have slain or cut off the head of their enemies, and it was done by their own hands. Those are the other examples of 'Kelingai' form who has been tattooed by the respondents.

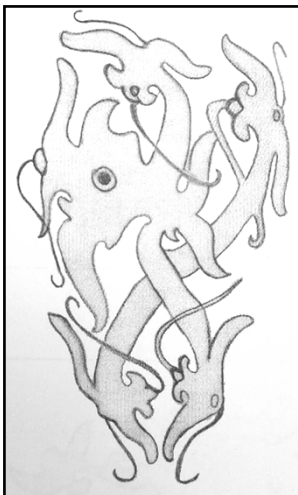


Figure 6: 'Kelingai' 5, on the left forearm

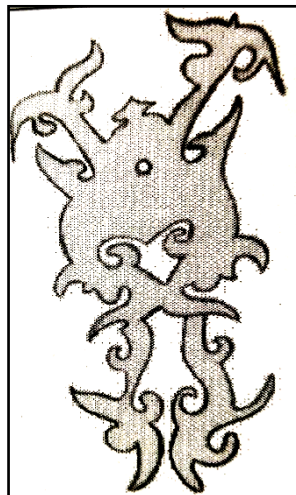


Figure 7: 'Kelingai' 6, on the right forearm

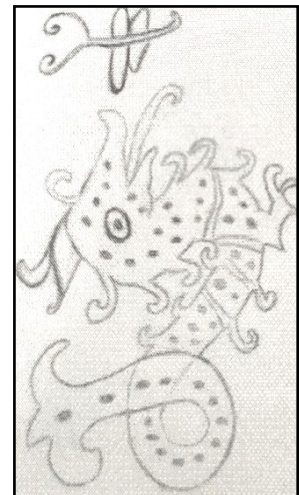


Figure 8: Kelingai' 7 on left forearm



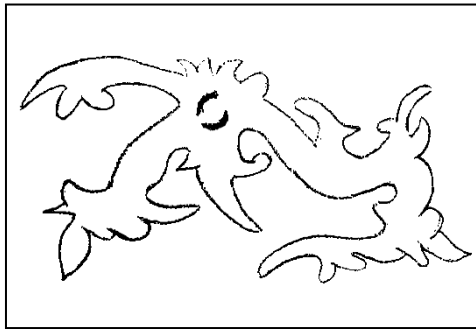


Figure 9: Kelingai 8, on the left forearm.

#### 4. FINDING

Based on the analysis that had been done applying the form and content approach, by the end, it can answer the objective of this research indirectly. This analysis revealed some of the aspects such as the history of 'tattooing culture, the meaning of 'Kelingai' motif, and identifying the form and meaning of the 'Kelingai' in Iban's tattoo. 'Kelingai' tattoo design was a specialty of Iban tattoo motif especially 'entegulun' tattoo which is mostly based on animals and plants form. The motif of 'Kelingai' tattoo represent that Iban was having a great knowledge in carving. Based from the interview approach, Some Iban's legend from other district says that, 'Kelingai' means the decoration motif of '*kala*' (scorpion) and that is why, it has to come with the beauties of curves, decoratively.

From this study, it obviously shows that the 'Kelingai' motif is used not only in body art tattoo but also used as a design motif of Iban's wood carving. For example, the decoration of wall, armour and the cover of the machete. Even now 'Kelingai' motifs are used to decorate the school, church, and community hall. Following with that, the beautiful decorated motif applied on the human body as a canvas or material to mark some material event such as the symbol of manhood, success in war and a means of identification in battle. Nowadays, the motif of 'Kelingai' design is popular among all generation.

The tattoo motif of 'Kelingai' was identified as the most desirable motif that was tattooed by people of Kampung Gayau. 'Kelingai' means that the tattoo design was begin with the basic curve at the centre or somewhere at the middle point. Then the other split curves will develop beautifully with structured curves expanding until the selected design of tattoo finished. This symbol deserved to be presented in visualization mode as a mark or tattoo motif design to remember certain places they had visited before. Generally, the motif of 'Kelingai' tattoo design is based on aquatic scenery and also other animals and bird figures. This motif is tattooed by men aged from 24 to 80 years old. It was found there are various type of 'Kelingai' tattoo design had been identified. Obviously, this tattoo motif design of 'Kelingai' is still remain popular throughout all age levels.

There are only nine out of forty-five selected respondents has been used the 'Kelingai' motif or the cultural form has by Iban community at Kampung Gayau. It is obviously show that the cultural tattoo form known as 'Kelingai' was tattooed only by men, presented in ten different 'Kelingai' tattoo design.

## 5. CONCLUSION

As the conclusions, most of the tattoo wearer in Iban society comes among Iban men as a symbol great knowledge of carving and also a symbol of heroes (brave person). Besides that, they would prefer to choose the environment to create and develop the curves of 'kelingai' motif in creative way.

Inter-cross cultural among two different tattoos cultural (traditional and contemporary tattoo involved two different generations, but they still instilling the same cultural. Iban society in Kampung Gayau is still strong beheld and preserved tattoo cultural among them. However, the identity of 'kelingai' motif in tattooing culture will have to face the strong challenge with contemporary tattoo design influences of 21<sup>st</sup> century tattoo design. Talking about the factor of mixing motifs and influences by many factors such as mass media and commercial activities strongly destroys the authenticity of traditional tattoo. Some popular artist nowadays, there are practicing tattoo as a fashion without knowing the meaning and history of the motif itself.

Thus, this research has taken it actions as to restore or documentation the 'kelingai' motifs that had been used by Iban society. So, it will not be forgotten by the next and future generation. Therefore, tattooing culture by using the 'Kelingai' motif among Iban community will still remain popular with their special identity among the other native groups of Sarawakian. It would be a great tragedy if this unique heritage of tattoo culture erodes and is eventually lost forever.

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